# A CT woman suddenly learned she could vote. It's despite a state office getting $0 to do voter education.

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Connecticut Secretary of State Stephanie Thomas speaks in Hartford about voting rights. (Sean Krofssik/Hartford Courant)

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After Tonya Carouthers was released from prison in Connecticut following assault convictions, she believed her criminal record would permanently ban her from being allowed to vote in elections.

She recently learned that a law passed in 2021 actually restored those rights.

Connecticut State Legislature passed a law in June 2021 restoring voting rights to people with felony convictions who have been released from prison and placed on parole status.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, approximately 4,000 people in Connecticut were re-enfranchised to vote when the law went into effect in 2022 following passage of Public Act No. 21-2.

“I had no idea this law had passed,” Carouthers said. “I’ve never voted before because I always thought if you had a felony you couldn’t vote. I know I’m one person, but I’m able to vote and I’m going to.”

Connecticut Secretary of State Stephanie Thomas recently spoke to formerly incarcerated individuals at the Hartford Reentry Welcome Center, educating them about their voting rights.

“Registrars tell me they receive calls about eligibility all of the time,” Thomas said. “People are confused. It’s something I’ve been trying to solve. There’s no law that requires us to tell you this information.

“We don’t have to say, ‘Hey, let’s alert all the people who are formerly incarcerated that there is a law change.’ No one’s responsible for it, and no budget is allocated for it. Our office gets $0 to do voter education, which is why I do a lot of stuff like this, coming to talk to people in person.

“If you’re a citizen on probation or parole, you can vote,” she said.

If previously convicted of a felony, that person can restore their voting rights upon their release, unless the felony offense is for violating Connecticut election laws. Those who violated Connecticut election laws must complete their probation and parole to regain their eligibility to vote.

Connecticut residents can also vote if they had a previous felony conviction and had voting rights restored but are currently incarcerated on a separate, non-felony conviction. Thomas said voting rights have been a priority of hers since she was a state representative. She is currently serving in her first term as the Connecticut Secretary of State.

Thomas recently spoke about her father being wrongly incarcerated and him having to stay locked up for a year because the family couldn’t afford bond. She was 6 years old.

“I often think of barriers. He was semi-literate, so he probably may have wanted to vote but didn’t feel like he would understand or be able to read what was on the ballot. So those types of experiences make me think about how to provide accessibility for all people and to recognize that people often have challenges that we don’t always think about like every day,” Thomas said.

“It’s really important for people who do have challenges to make those challenges known because the government cannot correct them if we don’t know they exist,” she said. “And if

I didn't have that lived experience, I wouldn't think so much about language help at the polls. Someone had to tell me or I had to live it."

According to the Connecticut Secretary of State 2026 CT Voting Guide, the new law "streamlines the absentee voting process for eligible incarcerated voters to vote by absentee ballot. Using a form created specifically for the Department of Correction, eligible voters can apply for, receive and return their absentee ballots in a timely manner. The new process strengthens oversight while helping remove barriers to voting for eligible incarcerated individuals.

"A person loses their right to vote in Connecticut if they have been convicted of a felony and are currently incarcerated in a correctional facility. You do not lose your right to vote if convicted and incarcerated for a misdemeanor or if in pretrial detention," the voting guide states.

For those voting while incarcerated, they must be at least 18 years old, a U.S. citizen and not currently incarcerated for a current felony conviction. They must then vote through absentee ballots.

Those with misdemeanors can vote or if the person has an unsentenced status with no prior felony conviction unless voting rights have been restored following the release from incarceration for the felony conviction.

"We worked with the Department of Correction over the last few years to do a few things to simplify that process," Thomas said. "First and foremost, we do annual trainings now with the counselors so that they have all the latest information. They can answer questions because a lot of questions come up, as you might imagine."

Previously, the incarcerated person needed to contact their town clerk, now the Secretary of State's office provides applications directly upon request.

Thomas said she's lobbying for more money for voter education. She cited an example of when she first took her current role as Secretary of State in January 2023. She was speaking at a school for the blind and she asked about their experience using the accessible voting machine for blind people. She said no one even knew about it.

"There's all of these things that the public really needs to know, but there's no conduit to explain it," Thomas said. "That's why I do things like the voter's guide. I do things like this, and I keep fighting for funding."

Beth Hines, executive director of Community Partners in Action, said it was important for her clients to learn they have the right to vote. The nonprofit organization "helps men, women and youth end the cycle of incarceration and thrive in the community."

“Here we are trying to empower people to make a successful transition, and certainly, it’s about meeting their basic needs, housing, employment and all that. But it’s also about ensuring that they feel part of the community that they’re in, and these local elections focus so much on our local government, our schools that they need to have a voice in how things are managed and how things turn out. It’s part of their civic duty.”

Hines said many times clients are just happy to be out of prison and aren’t paying attention to everything that is happening around them. She said Thomas gave them a “powerful message.”

“I spoke with a gentleman here today who is 65 and had never voted before,” Hines said. “Most people are very excited about having that right again that they thought they didn’t have.”

“Think about what we feel when we leave the voting booth. We feel like we’ve done our civic duty. We’ve exercised our right to vote. We’ve exercised our voice. How often are the voices of people coming home from prison stifled? So just being able to have that voice is really important.”